

# Intellectual Discourse

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# *Intellectual Discourse*

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**Intellectual Discourse**  
**Vol. 30, No. 1, 2022**

**Contents**

<i>Note from the Editor</i>	1
 <b>Research Articles</b>	
Understanding Malaysian Youth's Social Media Practices and Their Attitude towards Violent Extremism <i>Nurzali Ismail</i> <i>Jasmine Mohamed Jawhar</i> <i>Danial Mohd Yusuf</i> <i>Anis Izzati Ismail</i> <i>Raja Muhammad Khairul Akhtar Raja Mohd Naguib</i>	5
Should Heterogeneity Matter? The Case of Malaysia: Evaluating Public Service Motivation in a Non-Homogenous Society <i>Nadia Hezlin Yashaiya</i> <i>Abdillah Noh</i>	35
The Issue of the Elderly Homeless in Kuala Lumpur: Family Neglect and Its Contributing Factors <i>Zulkhairol Shukri</i> <i>Nik Norliati Fitri Md Nor</i> <i>Nurul Raffiza Norzehan</i>	59
Muslim Inventors of Reading and Writing Methods for the Blind: Predecessors of Braille <i>Awad Al-Khalaf</i> <i>Kassem Saad</i> <i>Adam Abdullah</i> <i>Mona Shehade</i> <i>Najla Aljarwan</i>	83

In the Name of Covid-19: Democratic Reversal and the Return of Authoritarian Malaysia under Muhyiddin's Perikatan Nasional <i>Muhamad M.N. Nadzri</i>	107
Confirmation Bias among Adherents of Red and Yellow Politics in Thailand <i>Norachit Jirasatthumb</i> <i>Phumsith Mahasuweerachai</i> <i>Atchara Sorasing</i>	135
Secularisation of Muslim Students: A Freirean Perspective on Biological Evolution Teaching in Islamic Schools <i>Ahmad Naharuddin Ramadhan</i> <i>Marzuki</i> <i>Heru Nurcahyo</i> <i>Bustami Subhan</i>	157
The Role of Mass Media As A Channel To Learn About Islam Among Muslims In Gombak <i>Kamaruzzaman bin Abdul Manan</i> <i>Mohd Noh bin Abdul Jalil</i> <i>Muhammad Ayman al-Akiti</i> <i>Lihanna binti Borhan</i> <i>Majdan bin Alias</i> <i>Shukran bin Abd Rahman</i> <i>Khamsiah binti Mohd Ismail</i>	187
The Best Solution for Pandemic Prevention of Covid-19: Important Notes in Light of the Quranic Perspectives <i>Abur Hamdi Usman</i> <i>Muhd. Najib Abdul Kadir</i> <i>Mohd Farid Ravi Abdullah</i>	213
Propagating an Alternative Solution for Indonesia`s Problems: A Framing Analysis on Hizb ut-Tahrir`s Narratives <i>Hasbi Aswar</i>	237

***Book Review***

AL-KAWAKIBI, Abdul Rahman. *The Nature of Tyranny and The Devastating Results of Oppression*. Foreword by Leon T. Goldsmith. Translated by Amer Chaikhouni. London: Hurst, 2021, 152 pp. Hardback.  
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# Should Heterogeneity Matter? The Case of Malaysia: Evaluating Public Service Motivation in a Non-Homogenous Society

Nadia Hezlin Yashaiya\*  
Abdillah Noh\*\*

**Abstract:** Drawing works on Public Service Motivation (PSM), heterogeneity and institutions, this article suggests that in assessing an individual's PSM and chances of joining the public service, ethnic heterogeneity matters. It matters because while personal attributes – like education, personal values and identity, political beliefs, socialisation – are important in determining one's public service motivation, an ethnically heterogeneous environment with the potential of producing numerous types of exclusive institutions can influence one's perception of the public service, alter one's motivation to serve in the public service or even determine one's chances of joining the civil service. This study is based on interviews among 28 officers who were attending training at the National Institute of Public Administration (INTAN) in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. This study found that ethnic heterogeneity influences an individual's perception, motivation and decision to join the public service.

**Keywords:** Public Service Motivation, Heterogeneity, Institutions, and Malaysia.

**Abstrak:** Merujuk kepada teori Motivasi Perkhidmatan Awam (PSM), faktor kepelbagaian dan institusi, artikel ini mencadangkan bahawa dalam menilai PSM dan peluang individu untuk menyertai perkhidmatan awam, kepelbagaian

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etnik adalah penting. Ia penting kerana walaupun sifat peribadi – seperti pendidikan, nilai peribadi dan identiti, kepercayaan politik, sosialisasi – boleh menentukan motivasi perkhidmatan awam seseorang, persekitaran yang pelbagai seperti latar belakang etnik juga boleh mewujudkan pelbagai jenis institusi eksklusif yang boleh mempengaruhi persepsi seseorang terhadap perkhidmatan awam, mengubah motivasi mereka untuk berkhidmat dalam perkhidmatan awam sekaligus menentukan peluang seseorang untuk menyertai perkhidmatan awam. Kajian ini dijalankan dengan menggunakan kaedah temubual dengan 28 orang PTD yang sedang menjalankan latihan di Institut Tadbiran Awam Negara (INTAN) Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Hasil kajian menunjukkan kepelbagaian etnik mempengaruhi persepsi, motivasi dan keputusan untuk berkhidmat di perkhidmatan awam.

**Kata kunci:** Motivasi Perkhidmatan Awam, Heterogeniti, Institusi, dan Malaysia.

## Introduction

There have been great efforts to identify and examine a special class of motivation – Public Service Motivation (PSM). In layman's term, public service motivation (PSM) can be described as individuals' tendency to serve in public institutions and organisations rather than in the private organisation. Perry and Wise (1990) and later Perry (1996) seminal work that conceptualised and neatly categorised PSM into various dimensions, triggered many works that addressed various concerns. Some of these include identifying antecedents to PSM such as gender, leadership, age or education (Naff and Crum, 1999; Bright, 2005; DeHart-Davis, Marlowe et al., 2006; Steijn and Leisink, 2006; and Moynihan and Pandey, 2007), examining the influence of social institutions – like family, religion, and profession – on PSM (see (Houston, 2000; Brewer, 2003: and Perry, 2007), examining the relationship between whistleblowing and PSM (Brewer and Selden, 1998) or studying causal link between job satisfaction and PSM (Naff and Crum, 1999).

Despite the extensive efforts, investigations on PSM have intuitively assumed a homogeneous setting. Though there are efforts to examine demographics – like gender, age, educational qualification, professions – with PSM, these works have implicitly assumed that respondents



are guided by the oneness of values or national value and not by disparate cultural, ethnic or religious values (Minkov and Hofstede, 2012). This obviously begs an important question: Does an ethnically heterogeneous setting produce PSM responses that are different from that of homogeneous settings?

We need to ask this question because there is a growing literature – that lies outside the PSM literature – that suggests that heterogeneity can affect the quality of public good delivery. (Sachs and Warner, 1995). Ethnic heterogeneity, for instance, produces social and political division that leads to rent-seeking and inferior policy choices (Easterly and Levine, 1997). Ethnically fragmented societies also tend to post lower social activities (Alesina and Spolaore, 1995; Alesina and La Ferrara, 1999; and La Ferrara and Alesina, 2000) and impede the provision of the public good. There is also work that found a negative relationship between heterogeneity and technical efficiency because of a polarised society (La Porta, Lopez-de-Silanes et al., 1999). These findings suggest the possibility that individuals raised in institutional silos – ethnically, culturally or religiously – may develop different interpretations of PSM dimensions like “commitment to the public interest,” “compassion,” “self-sacrifice” or even the idea of “attraction to public policy” which ultimately affect their delivery of the public good.

Another reason to undertake such an exercise is that a quick search on “heterogeneity and PSM” in major journals of public administration produced no result. To be fair, there are works that have alluded to the need to factor heterogeneous considerations (Van der Wal, 2015).

Van der Wal and Yang (2015) two-country study of Dutch and Chinese public sector workers found that Dutch and Chinese bureaucrats had different ideas on what they deemed as “realistic values of bureaucracy.” Chinese civil servants, for instance, ranked highly “Chinese political ecology,” the “rule of man has more weight than rule of law” or “serve the superior or special group” while their Dutch counterparts were more concerned on public sector management and the idea of efficiency, transparency, and accountability. Chinese civil servants also saw the importance of loyalty, obedience, and propriety; unlike Dutch civil servants who saw independent ideas and innovativeness as important considerations (Van der Wal and Yang, 2015). There are also accomplished scholars on PSM who have increasingly emphasised on the

importance of context and institutions when assessing PSM (Moynihan and Pandey, 2007; and Perry and Hondeghem, 2008). They describe, “good science is said to be contextual” and argue, “although PSM is measured at the individual level, it should never be seen apart from its institutional environment.” (Moynihan and Pandey, 2007; Kim and Vandenabeele, 2010; Moynihan, Vandenabeele et al., 2013; Moynihan, Vandenabeele, Perry and Jens Blom-Hansen, 2013, p. 289; Pandey and Moynihan, 2007, p. 41). Kim and Vandenabeele also alluded to the idea of explaining that PSM is a product of both “individual and societal phenomenon.” (Kim and Vandenabeele, 2010; and Vandenabeele, 2010, p. 103).

Does heterogeneity matter when we assess an individual’s PSM? If ethnic heterogeneity promotes exclusive institutions – ones that maintain ethnic, linguistic and cultural identity – do such institutions affect how individuals view ideas like “public service,” “public good” “community” or “civil service”? Or are individuals guided by a dominant generalised value – the same set of rationality and socio-psycho behaviour – and not coloured by heterogeneous values? Will a heterogeneous environment impose different barriers for individuals that will affect their perception and employment chances in the public service?

To address the above concerns, we examined PSM among higher civil servants in a highly plural or ethnically-heterogeneous society, Malaysia. In-depth interviews were conducted on Malaysia’s *Pegawai Tadbir dan Diplomatik* (PTD) or higher civil servants. Content analysis was adopted, and as far as possible, the work employed thick description to obtain greater insights into officers’ motivation. To improve the validity of data, interviews were conducted in an iterative manner, where similar questions were remodelled or reframed to ensure consistency of responses. It needs mentioning too that this is an exploratory study – a validation for the need to factor heterogeneity – one where the analysis would inform a larger project on motivation involving higher civil service officers in such setting.

The article is set out as follows. The first part will discuss the concepts used; specifically definitions of public service motivation, heterogeneity, and institutions. The second part will provide a brief description of Malaysia’s public administration, the purpose of which is to provide the institutional and historical context to Malaysia’s civil

service practice. The next part of the article will explain the methodology used and the details of the research where the paper will discuss the findings of the research.

### **Putting into context**

We define public service motivation (PSM) as “individuals’ disposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions and organisation” (Perry and Wise, 1990). Perry and Wise (1990) describe that PSM can be defined into three categories. The three categories include rational (where individual action is based on utility maximisation); normative (where actions are based on the need to conform to societal norms) and affective (where behaviours are based on an individual’s emotional response to social context). This definition is adopted because it subscribes to not only utilitarian reasoning but also imbues the importance of context and socio-psycho behaviour. Despite factoring context, the definition intuitively assumes that an individual’s PSM is persuaded by a general consideration of the society and not persuaded by his ethnic identity. Going by this definition, an individual might view his motivation to serve in the public service purely from a utilitarian perspective, that is, in his ability to formulate public policy and hence independent of his ethnic identity. Taking into account such consideration we adopt the hypothesis that:

*H1: Individual’s public service motivation (PSM) in an ethnically heterogeneous society- be they utilitarian, normative and affective – is independent of ethnic identity.*

Besides PSM, there are two other concepts that need addressing – heterogeneity and institutions. By heterogeneity, we mean a society that is plural in nature. We are persuaded by Furnivall (1948) definition where he describes a plural society as “a medley of people” where:

“...they mix but do not combine. Each group holds by its own religion, its own culture and language, its own ideas and ways. As individuals, they meet, but only in the marketplace, in buying and selling. There is a plural society, with different sections of the community living side by side, but separately, within the same political unit. Even in the racial sphere, there is a division of labour along racial lines.” (Furnivall 1948, p. 304)

To simplify, Malaysia's "medley of people" can be divided into two groups; indigenous and non-indigenous. Indigenous peoples of Malaysia are known as the *Bumiputeras* (sons of the soil). There are two subcategories within the *Bumiputeras* category. The first, are Malays that form the largest group and the second, are native tribes that together make up about 10-12 percent of the population. The non-indigenous group comprises of the Chinese, Indian and Eurasian or people of mixed percentage. According to the Malaysian census of 2010, the population of Malaysia is made up of 54.6% Malay, 24.6% Chinese, 7.3% Indian and Others 12.8% (mainly other indigenous natives).

Very much in keeping with Furnivall's (1948) definition, Malaysia's "medley of people" are not only culturally heterogeneous but have also developed diverse and highly exclusive institutional setups in the realms of education, recreation, economy, and politics (Furnivall, 1948). Despite 62 years of independence, Malaysians mostly attend different types of schools that are ethnically, linguistically and religiously defined. They go to different places of worship, live in different areas and are concentrated in certain employment sectors. Malays, for instance, dominate the civil service; Malays make up 67 percent of total civil servants, with Chinese making up 20 percent and Indians making up 7 percent. The Chinese, however, dominates Malaysia's private sector. Lim (2013) found that Chinese make up 56 percent of private-sector professionals while they made up only 20 percent of public sector professionals.

While it is impossible to detail Malaysia's heterogeneity given the limited space here, suffice it to say that the country's heterogeneous nature is a product of a number of factors: colonisation, migration, creation of spatially and ethnically defined industrial or employment activities, neglect of nation-building during colonial rule and a segregated and diverse educational institution that persisted even after independence. Malaysia's New Economic Policy (NEP), formed in 1971, perhaps captures the challenges that come with having a highly plural society. While the policy aimed to reduce the economic and social imbalance between indigenous and non-indigenous groups and to eliminate the identification of economic functions to certain groups, the NEP, in fact, deepened ethnic polarisation. Edwards (2005) found out that despite the NEP being successful in reducing overall poverty level, it also ended up producing concentration of groups "in particular

sectors of the economy” (Edwards, 2005, p. 9), one where the private sector became overly concentrated with non-indigenous population (Chinese and Indians) and the public sector seeing high concentration of the indigenous group (Malays).

The heterogeneous nature of Malaysian society is propped by ethnically-defined institutions, which are products of the country’s historical, political, economic, social development. By institutions, we mean the set of informal constraints (sanctions, taboos, customs, traditions, and codes of conduct) and formal rules (constitutions, laws, property rights) that facilitate or constraint how societal actors behave (North 1990). Institutions distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate, “right” and “wrong,” “possible” and “impossible” actions. They determine social behavioural patterns, roles, rules, values, ceremonies and they are embedded by way of religion, family and other social structures that provide order, stability, and predictability to behaviour (Perry and Hondeghem, 2008, p. 71; March and Olsen, 1989). Such institutions are maintained through socialisation where individuals identify themselves with significant others and assume a distinct social identity in order to become members of the institution (Vandenabeele, 2007, p. 548). Given a heterogeneous setting, socialisation is a powerful force that preserves and promotes the formation, maintenance, and distribution of particular institutions. For the purpose of establishing a basic understanding of PSM in a heterogeneous Malaysian context, we provide below a short background of the Malaysian civil service.

### **Background of Malaysia’s Public Administration**

Malaysia’s public administration is a product of centuries of historical, socio-cultural and institutional experiences. Before British colonial rule, Malaysia (Malaya) had an elaborate administrative structure, called the *adat Temenggong*, where the Malay sultans were both the administrative head as well as the head of government. British colonial rule brought a modern professional civil service, one where Malay aristocrats were reassigned new positions in the professional service and entered the wage economy for the first time (Siddiquee, 2013).

British indirect rule in Malaya meant British retention of Malay *de jure* power (by virtue of Malay rulers being heads of state and highest authority in the state council), which effectively saw continued incorporation of Malay considerations in the civil service. Throughout

British colonial rule, the administration catered to the demands of Malay royal houses with the unintended consequence of retaining a Malay character in the bureaucracy. There are many examples of this. In 1910, aristocratic elites demanded that Malays be exposed to the rigours of modern administration, which led to the introduction of an elite service called the Malay Administrative Service (MAS). To ensure that there would be a steady supply of Malay officers in the MAS, the colonial administration established the Malay College Kuala Kangsar (MCKK) in 1912, a boarding school that catered initially to children of aristocrats.

The twentieth century saw Malay aristocrats demanding more places be provided for Malays in the civil service. There was no objection from the administration mainly because there was indeed the need to engage Malays into the modern sector economy. There was the worry that Malays were not heavily involved in the private sector, unlike non-Malays who were highly represented in the private sector - as workers in the tin mines or agricultural plantations or as traders and professionals (Puthuchery, 1978) and such trend could create underemployment and unemployment (Tilman, 1968). Such was the concern that the British administration imposed a preference policy for the appointment of Malay officers. In 1922 – in the midst of a slump in the global economy - the Retrenchment Commission recommended that the ratio of Malays to the local-born-non-Malays appointment in the civil service be kept to seven Malays to three non-Malays (Roff, 1965). This policy was amended in 1952 where the new ratio was four Malays to one Non-Malay (Haque 2003). Despite having such preference policy Malays only dominated junior positions (Tilman, 1968). At the time of independence in 1957, Malays made up only 14.1% of senior officers compared to non-Malays (which also included many retained British officers) who made up about 24.8% of senior officers (Puthuchery, 1978).

The above historical accounts are important because it provides the background to understanding the present character of the Malaysian civil service. Several themes can be drawn from the above description, for instance, that of the persistence of Malay dominance, the skewed nature of public and private sector employment that is coloured by ethnic considerations or even the increasing returns that come from continued investment in mutually exclusive institutions. While scholars are understandably quick to attribute low non-Malay participation to

the preference policy (four “*Bumiputera*” to one “*non-Bumiputera*” ) the above historical readings also give indications that there are reasons to believe that non-Malays also prefer the private sector. Alatas (1977), for instance, points out that the improvement in the economy and the expansion of the private sector provided non-Malays with lucrative returns that make joining the public sector a lesser option. Woo’s (2014) more recent analysis confirms the find when she found that the paucity of non-Malays in the public sector was due to non-Malays opting for the private sector. Kuan Heong’s (2018) latest work also found that given a choice between private and public sector employment, the majority of respondents (non-Malays final year university students) would opt for the private sector. The analysis also found support in Lim’s (2013) earlier findings which found that tertiary-educated Chinese preferred private sector employment; Chinese in fact made up 56% of private-sector professionals as compared to 20% of public sector professionals. The above description informs us of the concerns raised in this study. We proceed now with the details of the research.

The discussions above – the Malaysian civil service, deliberations on the idea of heterogeneity and a plural society and the impact of institutions – raise a number of points that this study will be addressing: the relevance of ethnic heterogeneity in assessing one’s motivation for public service, the importance of institutions, specifically, the prevalence of mutually exclusive institutions in shaping one’s socialisation process, perception of the civil service and preference for the particular employment sector. Taking these concerns, we hypothesise that:

*H2: In an ethnically- heterogeneous society, one’s ethnic identity does not determine one’s capacity to develop public service motivation because every ethnic community experiences a similar socialisation process.*

*H3: Perception of the civil service in a heterogeneous society is independent of one’s ethnic identity.*

*H4: Individual’s preference to join the public sector (or private sector) is similar between indigenous and non-indigenous officers.*

## Demographics

Qualitative research was employed to elicit a detailed response from higher civil service officers on their motivations to join the public service. Twenty-eight higher civil servants or *Pegawai Tadbir dan Diplomatik (PTD)* or Administrative and Diplomatic Officers were involved. These officers are considered *crème de la crème* of Malaysia's civil service officers as they are targeted to take on important policy roles in the administration. The interviews were conducted in the second quarter of 2017 when the PTD officers were attending a 10-month training at the National Institute of Public Administration or *Institut Tadbiran Awam Negara* (INTAN).

The study chose PTD officers at INTAN because having officers in one setting helped ease administrative challenges. This is because, given the strict civil service code of privacy and confidentiality of data, the administrative procedures needed to obtain the interviews were onerous. The process of obtaining permission for the interviews was challenging and the challenge would be even more should the interviews be carried on officers spread in the various ministries and agencies.

Purposive sampling was carried out. We requested that INTAN provide the maximum number of non-indigenous officers available given that there were only 40 (11%) non-indigenous officers (non-Malays) among the 378 officers in the cohort attending training. Thirty officers were initially requested – 10 each from the major ethnic groups. The non-indigenous group was split into two subgroups – Indian and Chinese officers. For indigenous officers, officers were chosen on a random basis due to their large numbers. In all, 28 officers agreed to participate in the interview, giving a response rate of 93 percent. Out of the 28 officers, 18 were non-indigenous officers, nine Chinese and nine Indian officers. Each interview lasted about one hour. The interviews took six months to complete and were all conducted on the INTAN campus.

Out of the 28 respondents, 16 had worked in the private sector, eight had worked in the public sector as non-PTD officers, two had previously worked in not-for-profit organisations and two had no job experience prior to joining the scheme. The eight respondents who had previously worked in the public sector held normal officer positions and were not under the PTD scheme. Only one respondent did not have any work



experience. With regards to qualifications, nine have Masters Degrees, two have PhDs with the rest having bachelor's degrees. Besides academic qualifications, three of the respondents were holders of the Perdana Fellowship. This is a six -month fellowship scheme where top young graduates would shadow ministers to gain first-hand experience on matters of policymaking. Among the 28 respondents, 10 were also government scholars. These officers were given scholarships to study at the undergraduate level at reputed overseas universities where upon graduation they are required to serve a bond with the Malaysian public service for five years. From the interviews, we found that the five-year bond is not strictly adhered to. Officers spoke of friends who were government scholars but who chose not to return home. The officers said that this was possible because there had been no legal cases brought by the government against bond breakers. We turn now to the specifics of the interviews.

### **Methods**

Semi-structured interviews were employed. Six questions were posed to the 28 PTD officers. The questions were designed to provide a comprehensive universe of motivations that guided officers' choice of employment. Additional questions were also asked. In carrying out the follow-up questions, prompts and probes were used, keeping in mind officers' various motivations and their relevance to issues of heterogeneity. To ensure consistency of responses an iterative method was adopted. This is when at the "end" of the interview, the recorder was turned off and at this point, the interviewer would pose the same six questions - with slight variances or reframing - for the purpose of validating respondents' earlier taped responses. We discuss now the details of the findings.

### **Findings**

The six questions were broad questions that asked respondents on what it means to make a positive difference to society, the reasons for people to do good, the dimensions of public service motivation (PSM) that best reflect their choice of joining the service, their motivations to join the higher civil service and the people who have been instrumental in making them consider the scheme. There are also questions on officers' past employment sectors and working experience as well as their assessment of the experience applying for the scheme. The purpose

of doing so was not only to examine different aspects of motivation of these officers but also to find out the relevance of heterogeneity as an important consideration when assessing public service motivation among individuals in a highly plural society.

Content analysis was carried out. We used two broad categories from which to understand the relevance of heterogeneity to an individual's motivation. The first category was on individuals' sense of public duty or service (*H1*). Here we examined the text responses of the two groups of officers – indigenous and non-indigenous – by noting words associated with public duty or service and examining whether there is a significant difference in responses between the two groups. The second category was to examine the significance of institutions in a heterogeneous setting. To examine the impact of institutions, we test out the three hypotheses (*H2*, *H3*, and *H4*). Socialisation, perception of the civil service, and the perception of the attractiveness of employment sectors served as proxies to measuring institutions. They helped us analysed the text and sort out words that best capture the impact of institutions. To find out the impact of institutions and heterogeneity, we then compared the responses of the two groups – indigenous and non-indigenous officers. We look now at the findings for what it means to do “good for society.”

### **The different meanings of doing “good for society.”**

We found that there are distinct responses from both indigenous and non-indigenous officers. For example, when assessing responses to what it meant “to do good and to make a positive difference to society,” indigenous officers and non-indigenous gave varied responses. All indigenous officers except for one respondent talked of the need to provide for the greater society. One indigenous officer, for example, considered himself “as ambassador to improve public policies...make a positive impact on people's life.” Another officer spoke of “social causes” and “to make Malaysia better.” Another officer pointed to serve for the larger interest and “moving forward as one people (Malaysians).” Another officer talked about improving “the way people work in the government sector.” Another indigenous officer mentioned the “idea that you are serving the society ...is a strong motivator” and “I view Malaysians as my customers.” The only exception was the response from one officer who highlights he served because “part of it is because of religion and ...another part is because of patriotism.”

The responses from non-indigenous officers were slight nuanced. While all spoke about wanting to serve society, they also emphasised the need for them to serve their specific community. One non-indigenous officer remarked that “I once told a panel of interviewers that the number of Chinese in this sector is so small” and he told the interviewers that he wanted “to make some changes to improve my community.” Another of the non-indigenous PTD officers remarked one of her reasons to join the PTD was “... helping the community. Indian population size is very small (less than 7%). I feel if I am there, I would be able to help my community.” She also mentioned the perks of being in such a service because “...the power is so immense. This is not being racist. I tend to see it from an angle, if you are a Malay, you give back to your community and uplift. If the Chinese get to do for their society and uplift and Indians (also) get to do.”

Besides asking the officers about making a positive difference, the officers were asked to identify a particular dimension of public service motivation that best fit them after being briefed on each dimension of PSM. Charlie, a non-indigenous respondent pointed to “attraction to policymaking.” He chose the dimension because as an activist and has worked for a not-for-profit organisation he felt that his community (Indian) needed the most help. He elaborated that:

“I was very active in a movement to help my race in applying to public universities... my community did not get a place in public universities because many of them sent incomplete documents that fail to secure them a place in public universities... After years of effort in the movement, I can see an increase in numbers of my race in the public universities.”

Another non-indigenous officer chose the “ability to influence public policies” reasoning that:

“It is my dream to work in the public sector because there is so little percentage of Chinese in the bureaucracy. I am not racist but if I am in the system, I can lead my community.”

Another non-indigenous respondent also shared the need to help his community pointing out that:

“Indian population size is very small...I would be able to help my community and at the same time help in whichever department I am posted to.”

The responses from indigenous officers contrasted with that of non-indigenous officers. Unlike non-indigenous officers, indigenous officers used general terms like “serve the nation,” “responsibility to society” or “the need to think of others.” Three indigenous respondents cited compassion as a prime motivator. One officer pointed out that “as a decision-maker in public policy, I will make sure that I will identify other people’s need and it is my responsibility to serve our nation.” Another officer pointed to the need “to help people because coming from a non-privilege background” he did not know “the right channel to communicate the need.” Another officer chose “commitment to public value” as he felt that “as a public servant, I feel that I need to think for others and everyone around me in terms of public values.” One indigenous officer, however, took exception to the remarks posted by other indigenous officers. The officer chose “attracting to public policy” because he felt that the dimension best reflected the need to change the life of his “people.” The respondent came from an indigenous tribe in Sabah and felt that “once I am in a position to influence public policy, I will look into some loopholes...especially the lack of public transport in rural areas in Sabah. We need to revamp this policy.”

The responses generally affirm that when it comes to delivering the public good, officers in a heterogeneous environment had a varied idea of who the beneficiaries are. While indigenous officers – in general targeted the larger community, the choices made by non-indigenous officers were more qualified and directed toward serving specific communities, not just the larger society. The responses indicate that in a heterogeneous setting, evaluating PSM needs qualification. There is every likelihood that “serving the public” could mean serving the public in general as it is about serving a specific community. We turn now to another important aspect of the study – the role of institutions in influencing or determining an individual’s public service motivation.

### **Institutional quality and heterogeneity.**

If institutions determine social behavioural patterns, roles, rules, values, ceremonies and are embedded by way of religion, family and other social structures that provide order, stability, and predictability to behaviour (Perry and Hondeghem, 2008, p. 71), then the responses given by the PTD officers demonstrate the huge influence that institutions exact on individual’s PSM. As mentioned above, we used three subcategories

or proxies to measure the impact of institutions on an individual's motivation for public services. The proxies are – socialisation, views of the civil service and choice of employment sector (H2, H3, and H4 respectively).

The responses demonstrate the significance of exclusive institutions when examining one's motivation to serve in public service. We found that indigenous and non-indigenous officers underwent different socialisation process that ultimately influenced their decision to serve in the civil service. Seven out of eight indigenous officers mentioned that they joined the PTD scheme because of primary socialisation. The officers mentioned having parents, siblings, spouse or friends who were public servants. Some officers remarked that they knew of jobs in public service from an early age because they had either parent, husband, cousins who are PTD officers.

The responses from non-indigenous officers were different. Unlike indigenous officers where primary socialisation was instrumental, non-indigenous officers noted that they joined the service because of secondary socialisation. The officers said that if they were to rely on primary socialisation, they would not have considered the public service. The officers said that this is because they did not find encouragement to join the civil service from people close to them. They only knew about the civil service and decided to join the PTD scheme from secondary socialisation – from university lecturers, supervisors and university friends. In fact, fourteen out of eighteen non-indigenous respondents mentioned that their family members did not support their application to be PTD officers. They said that their loved ones did not see a career in public service as something worth pursuing and urged them instead to join the private sector for better pay and career opportunities or even seek overseas employment. One respondent, for instance, remarked that “my parents did not agree with my decisions to be part of this scheme...my father thinks that I deserve a better job than working for the government and my mother was telling me that I could go further by staying away from Malaysia.”

One officer only got to know about the PTD scheme after clinching a government scholarship. Another officer said that “I only know about this scheme when I was appointed as Perdana fellow.” She went to say that being a Perdana fellow and having to work alongside a minister was

an eye-opener that gave her a better appreciation of the inner workings of the civil service. Another non-indigenous officer remarked on the importance of secondary socialisation saying that “being a Perdana fellow informed me of the PTD and other civil service schemes... Before this, I did not know.” Only one non-indigenous officer took an exception. The officer mentioned that her early exposure to the life of a civil servant prompted her to opt for the scheme. She said “Back then when my mum who was working in the Agricultural office, we used to spend time in her office after school. That was the time when I saw the ADO (Administrative Officer) now called PTD... the ADOs were very friendly and warm to us... At that point, I knew that I would love to be working in the public sector.”

The powerful impact of institutions in a heterogeneous setting is also reflected when we probed the officers for their views of the PTD scheme and their experience applying for the scheme. The question was aimed to test H3, which is to gauge officers’ perception of the civil service and their assessment of the fairness of the selection process in the civil service given the common views of discriminatory hiring practices. Nearly all non-indigenous officers - eighteen out of twenty non-indigenous respondents - said that they secured a place in the scheme on their first attempt.

The officers, however, acknowledged that they had initial reservations when they applied for the scheme. All of them thought that securing a job in the public sector was going to be difficult. After successfully completing the selection process, one non-indigenous officer remarked that the low number was because of perception, saying that “Initially, I was sceptical, but I tried. I was the only one in my family who applied for this scheme and surprised that I was selected.” She elaborated that “People of my race perceived the government jobs very negatively. They always assume that they will not be given a chance to join the scheme, but no one applied. This proved that the system is fair and we (Chinese) never tried applying for government jobs but claimed that the system is unfair.” Another non-indigenous officer, also gave a similar assessment, mentioning that there was a common perception that non-indigenous applicants would not get a place in the scheme. She reiterated that “I think those (non-indigenous applicants) who apply stand a better chance of getting it because the numbers are so small. I know. I am Indian, but it is true. They don’t apply.” Another respondent,

a graduate from an American university gave a similar remark saying that “Our people do not know a lot about government jobs because the pay is low. My parents think I should work in the private sector and earn more money because I am a US graduate.”

The ease in gaining a place in the PTD scheme for non-indigenous officers contrasted with that experienced by the indigenous group. Indigenous officers felt that the recruitment process was far more stringent. Only two indigenous respondents secured a place in the scheme on their first attempt, five indigenous respondents secured the place after attempting twice and one respondent who got into the scheme on his third attempt.

The different responses from both non-indigenous and indigenous demonstrate the significance of exclusive institutions in shaping an individual’s perception of hiring practices in the civil service. Malaysia’s social, historical and political experiences have created exclusive institutions, one where the perception of the civil service – discriminatory or otherwise – is determined along the ethnic dimension. Left unchallenged the propagation of these institutions could well deter individuals with latent PSM from joining the public service.

We also asked respondents on their choice of the public sector and their experience of past employment sectors. This question test H4, which is to measure the impact institutions have on an individual’s employment chances in a different sector. We ask this because there is a lot of work in the literature, described above, that suggests that Malaysia’s employment sector is highly segregated along the ethnic dimension.

On broad terms, there is no distinct difference between non-indigenous and indigenous officers when it comes to reasons to join the service; all officers displayed an almost similar mix of PSM. Indigenous officers, for example, cited highly on items like “job security,” “challenging job content,” “high salary,” “helping others” and “accomplishing something worthwhile.” Among the non-indigenous group, Chinese officers rated highly items like, “job security,” “and a job that is useful to society,” “career development,” “prestige and status.” Among the non-indigenous, Indian officers rated highly on items like, “helping others,” “job that is useful to society,” “prestige and status.”

Despite the broad similarities, indigenous officers however listed “high salary” as the most important consideration when choosing the public sector. This is in contrast with that of non-indigenous officers. When probed, most indigenous officers said that the public sector pay was more attractive than the private sector. While they displayed the need to serve “society or Malaysians in general,” they also commented that one reason for them joining the public service was because of the difficulty of getting employment in the private sector. Indigenous officers who had the experience of working in the private sector cited “low pay” and “discrimination” in the private sector. Some added that it was the frustration of not getting a well-paying and rewarding career in the private sector that drove them to consider the public sector. One officer, who holds a Ph.D., told of her difficult experience working in the private sector that eventually forced her to seek public sector employment. She remarked that “There is bias in the private sector.” She said that “I was treated and paid differently. In my experience, one private sector that prefers non-Malays paid a consultant with lower academic qualification (with a degree). He was paid more RM2000 a month when I was paid lower than RM2000 with a Master’s degree.” Another respondent who was a tax auditor in the private sector for four years mentioned that it was, “racial discrimination in terms of pay and job position,” which forced her to leave for a public sector job. Another indigenous officer mentioned that joining the PTD scheme was a better option because he faced discrimination in the private sector when it came to job scope and pay and that he was not able to get a job that matched his qualifications in law and governance. One officer mentioned that despite being a degree holder, she held the position of administrative clerk for four years in the private sector, mentioning that “racial discrimination in terms of pay and job position” made her choose the public sector. Another respondent, who used to work as a chemist in a private firm for two years cited “challenging job scope” and “low pay” as her reason to quit the private sector.

The responses contrasted with those of non-indigenous officers who rated private sector perks as more attractive than the public sector. Discrimination in the private sector was not mentioned by non-indigenous officers. In fact, all non-indigenous officers felt that the private sector gave an attractive salary. They cited that the reason that they left their private job for the public sector was because of non-monetary benefits.



For the non-indigenous officers, many felt that the private sector was attractive but chose the public sector because it gave them the opportunity to serve the larger society and not narrow private interest. One non-indigenous officer gave the reason that although the salary and “job position” (private sector) were good, “I am only contributing to one organisation. Another officer mentioned that she worked for a private investment bank upon graduation but left after two weeks, saying that it was not her calling, even though the pay was competitive. She mentioned that her experience working with policymakers as a Perdana fellow gave her a new perspective of the public service pointing out that “I admire higher civil service officer’s role in the public service... They put in so much effort in their duties to improve public service delivery... The monthly allowance (Perdana fellowship) is high for a fresh graduate.” There were other non-indigenous officers who wanted to join the scheme to “try-out.” One officer who spent two years as an engineer with an oil and gas company said he chose the PTD scheme to explore different job scope. Another respondent (non-indigenous) who used to work for a not-for-profit (NGO) organisation, mentioned that even though the work culture and remuneration in the NGO were good, he chose the public sector because working in an NGO gave him limited power to improve the quality of life and deliver quality public good.

The responses above demonstrate the powerful impact of institutions in influencing one’s employment option. Clearly, the responses show that the Malaysian employment sector is highly segregated along ethnic dimensions. The responses confirm earlier works that identify a particular ethnic group with a particular employment sector. For indigenous officers, joining the civil service was a better option. For them, public service offers better pay since they felt discriminated in the private sector. The case is different for non-indigenous officers. They saw the private sector as a better option – if one considers the remuneration – but chose to be in the civil service for non-monetary reasons. An important lesson that can be drawn from this, that is useful for personnel administration, is that the mutually exclusive nature of Malaysia’s institutions – along ethnic dimensions – has denied both employment sectors (public and private sector) from optimum human resources. Unmistakably, the generation of exclusive institutions has ended up denying both the public and the private sector of suitably motivated individuals.

## Conclusion

The findings disconfirm the four hypotheses. This study found that individual's public service motivation (PSM) in an ethnically heterogeneous society is dependent on ethnic identity. This study also confirms that an ethnically-heterogeneous society, one's ethnic identity determines one's capacity to develop public service motivation because every ethnic community experiences a different socialisation process. It is also revealed that the perception of the civil service in a heterogeneous society is dependent on one's ethnic identity. This study also proved that an individual's preference to join the public sector (or private sector) is different between indigenous and non-indigenous officers.

The responses show that heterogeneity matters when assessing an individual's PSM. A point to note is that heterogeneity matters because it churns out exclusive institutions that produce a number of effects relating to PSM. The findings reveal that a heterogeneous setting can generate different versions of what it means to serve society. While the officers highlighted the need to be of service to the general society, the term "society" can take a more nuanced meaning. In a heterogeneous setting – even while highlighting the need to serve others - officers mentioned the need to be of service to their own community. The responses also show that exclusive institutions produce different hurdles or incentives to individuals. They demonstrate that socialisation is capable of generating multiple perceptions of certain institutions (civil service) that affect an individual's choice of employment. The responses show that primary and secondary socialisation can create different impressions of the civil service and with it, affect an individual's decision to be in the civil service. Given the case, there is the likelihood that an individual's PSM might be suppressed because of socialisation. Heterogeneity and the creation of institutions also create different views of social institutions that either encourage or inhibit one from contributing to public service. Unlike Rainey (1982) who suggested that individuals with high PSM would naturally gravitate toward public sector employment, the Malaysian experience suggests that in a heterogeneous setting, there are other caveats to consider. This is because heterogeneity breeds institutions that impose different hurdles and incentives for individuals to join the service.

This study makes no pretence that it is an exploratory one; it is part of a larger project that diagnoses the different motivational sets of higher civil servants in Malaysia. Exploratory as it may be, the empirical findings reiterate the need for more comparative and cross-national research to improve the conceptualization and operational measurement of PSM (Perry 2010). Perry et al., (2010) suggest that future works on PSM demand that we be “attentive to linguistic, contextual and cultural considerations.” (p. 687). Perhaps future work can attempt to probe the relevance of PSM with issues from the fields of psychology, sociology, leadership, management, politics and public policy.

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# In This Issue

## *Note from the Editor*

## *Research Articles*

**Nurzali Ismail, Jasmine Mohamed Jawhar, Danial Mohd Yusuf, Anis Izzati Ismail & Raja Muhammad Khairul Akhtar Raja Mohd Naguib**

Understanding Malaysian Youth's Social Media Practices and Their Attitude towards Violent Extremism

**Nadia Hezlin Yashaiya & Abdillah Noh**

Should Heterogeneity Matter? The Case of Malaysia: Evaluating Public Service Motivation in a Non-Homogenous Society

**Zulkhairol Shukri, Nik Norliati Fitri Md Nor & Nurul Raffiza Norzehan**

The Issue of the Elderly Homeless in Kuala Lumpur: Family Neglect and Its Contributing Factors

**Awad Al-Khalaf, Kassem Saad, Adam Abdullah, Mona Shehade & Najla Aljarwan**

Muslim Inventors of Reading and Writing Methods for the Blind: Predecessors of Braille

**Muhamad M.N. Nadzri**

In the Name of Covid-19: Democratic Reversal and the Return of Authoritarian Malaysia under Muhyiddin's Perikatan Nasional

**Norachit Jirasatthumb, Phumsith Mahasuweerachai & Atchara Sorasing**

Confirmation Bias among Adherents of Red and Yellow Politics in Thailand

**Ahmad Naharuddin Ramadhan, Marzuki, Heru Nurcahyo & Bustami Subhan**

Secularisation of Muslim Students: A Freirean Perspective on Biological Evolution Teaching in Islamic Schools

**Kamaruzzaman bin Abdul Manan, Mohd Noh bin Abdul Jalil, Muhammad Ayman al-Akifi, Lihanna binti Borhan, Majdan bin Alias, Shukran bin Abd Rahman & Khamsiah binti Mohd Ismail**

The Role of Mass Media As A Channel To Learn About Islam Among Muslims In Gombak

**Abur Hamdi Usman, Muhd. Najib Abdul Kadir & Mohd Farid Ravi Abdullah**

The Best Solution for Pandemic Prevention of Covid-19: Important Notes in Light of the Quranic Perspectives

**Hasbi Aswar**

Propagating an Alternative Solution for Indonesia's Problems: A Framing Analysis on Hizb ut-Tahrir's Narratives

## *Book Reviews*

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